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Ruan Yuan (1764-1849) and the Transmission of Classical Texts between the 18th and 19th Centuries

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Abstract

Ruan Yuan, a Chinese contemporary of Tasan, was the last of the high officials who advocated Han studies in the Qianlong and Jiaqing periods. As a patron of scholarship at his time, he went beyond his own intellectual propensities and did not set aside all partisans of Song studies. He thus contributed to the harmonisation of Song and Han studies. He also paid particular attention to the *Xiaojing*, the *Classic of Filial Piety* and gave original interpretations of some key notions of Confucianism like the sense of humanity (*ren*). This paper attempts to describe Yuan Ruan's role in the transmission of classical texts in the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Keywords

Ruan Yuan, Han Studies, Song Studies, Classics

Choosing a Chinese thinker contemporary with Chông Yagyong 丁若鏞, also known as Tasan 茶山 (1762-1836), is not an easy task because there is a large number of great scholars who lived between the 18th and 19th centuries. Even looking only at the scholars that Tasan's friend Park Che-ga 朴齊家 (1750-1805) met in Beijing between 1790 and 1801, among them were Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724-1805), Li Dingyuan 李鼎元 (*jinshi* 1778), Zhu Delin 祝德麟 (1742-1798), Tang Leyu 唐樂宇 (circa 1740-1791), Peng Yuanrui 彭元瑞 (1731-1803), Weng Fanggang 翁方綱 (1733-1818), Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764-1849), Jiang Deliang 江德量 (1752-1793), Tie Bao 鐵保 (1752-1824), Luo Pin 羅聘 (1733-1799), Sun Xingyan 孫星衍 (1753-1818), and Xiong Fangshou 熊方受 (*jinshi* 1790).¹ Living in the Qianlong (1736-1796) and Jiaqing (1796-1821) periods, most of them were expert philologists and heirs to Hui Dong 惠棟 (1697-1758) and Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724-1777). The list becomes longer if we add other erudite scholars such as the historian Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738-1801),² and the philosopher Fang Dongshu 方東樹 (1772-1851), a faithful follower of Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130-1200) school. The reason for choosing Ruan Yuan is that he was an immediate contemporary of Tasan, who quoted him, and that Kim Chông-hui 金正喜 (1786-1856), a disciple of Park Che-ga, met him in 1809. Even if Ruan Yuan's career was filled with success in comparison to Tasan's more tortuous one, the two thinkers are marked by Han studies (*hanxue* 漢學), all the while inspiring themselves from the heritage of Song Neo-Confucianism.³ Some consider that Ruan was one of the most influential Chinese thinkers in

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¹ Ge Rongjin 葛榮晉 (ed.), *Zhongguo shixue sixiangshi* 中國實學思想史 (Chinese History of the Thought of Practical Studies), xia, Pékin: Shoudu shifan daxue chubanshe, 1994, p. 392. I have corrected some errors of these names in the original text.

² On Zhang Xuecheng, see D. Nivison, *The Life and Thought of Chang Hsueh-cheng (1738-1801)*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966.

³ On this aspect, see especially Mark Setton, *Chông Yagyong: Korea's Challenge to Orthodox Neo-Confucianism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.

Korea in this period.⁴ He displayed openness not only towards Korea, but also towards Japan. He referred to *Shichikei Mōshi kōbun hoi* 七經孟子考文補遺 (Supplementary Thoughts on the Critical Study of the Seven Classics and Mencius) by the Japanese thinker Yamanoi Konron 山井崑崙 (1690-1728) in his new critical edition of the *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經註疏 (Notes and Commentaries on the Thirteen Classics).

The contemporary historian Qian Mu (Ch'en Mu 錢穆, 1895-1990) states concerning this great scholar of the 18th and 19th centuries that he was the last of the high officials who advocated Han studies in the Qianlong and Jiaqing periods.⁵ Even if he gave greater importance to the philological aspects of classical studies, as his predecessors and contemporaries such as Dai Zhen and Qiao Xun 焦循 (1763-1820) did, he adopted a more open attitude towards the philosophical interpretation of the Neo-Confucians.⁶ Who is this individual? What was his role in the transmission of classical texts in the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries? What are the principal ideas or rather the original contributions of this thinker? All of these questions are deserving of consideration. References to Ruan Yuan in this paper will be essentially based on his *Yanjing shi ji* 擘經室集 (Collection from the Studio of the Study of the Classics).

Since Ruan Yuan's biography has already been the subject of an important monograph by Betty Peh-T'i Wei,⁷ I will content myself with a few lines to bring out the principal events in Ruan's life according to his biography in the *Qingshi gao* 清史稿 (Draft History of the Qing Dynasty).⁸ Born in Yizheng 儀征 in Jiangsu, Ruan Yuan, zi Boyuan 伯元, grew up and lived out his retirement until his death in Yangzhou. Awarded the *jinshi* degree in 1789, or in other words the 54th year of Qianlong's reign, Ruan Yuan had a brilliant official career, as much in the provinces as in the capital. After successfully passing his doctoral examinations, he was elected chief among the compilers at the Hanlin Academy and became a reviser. In the 58th year of Qianlong's reign (1793), he was appointed director of studies (*xuezheng* 學政) in Shandong before being transferred to Zhejiang in 1795. From 1798, he was successively director at the Ministries of the Army, Rites, and Revenue. Between 1799 and 1805, and thereafter between 1807 and 1810, he was appointed twice as an itinerant governor (*xunfu* 巡撫) in Zhejiang. It is there that he directed actions against pirates. In the 19th year of the Jiaqing period (1814), he became itinerant governor in Jiangxi and then in Henan. From 1817, he was appointed governor-general (*zongdu* 總督) of Huguang, and then of Liang Guang (Guangdong and Guangxi) and Yungui (Yunnan and Guizhou). Near the end of his life, he returned to the capital and assumed the duties of president of the Censorate (1836). He retired in 1838 and received the honorific title of Grand Preceptor to the Crown Prince (*taizi taibao* 太子太保).

Wherever he was posted, Ruan Yuan always exhorted the population to study. He was the founder of the Gujing jingshe 詁經精舍 (Academy of the Exegesis of the Classics) at

⁴ Chen Donghui 陳東輝, "Ruan Yuan zai Zhong Chao guanxi shi shang de ruogan shiji kaoshu" 阮元在中朝關係史上的若干事跡攷述 (On some Facts concerning Ruan Yuan in the History of Sino-Korean Relations), *Hunan daxue xuebao* (Shehui kexue ban) 湖南大學學報 (社會科學版), vol. 20, 2006, no. 2, pp. 43-46.

⁵ Qian Mu, *Zhongguo jin sanbai nian xueshu shi* 中國近三百年學術史 (Intellectual History of China in the Last Three Hundred Years), xia, Peking: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1997, p. 528.

⁶ On the paradigmatic opposition between philosophical and philological interpretations, see Benjamin A. Elman, "Philosophy (I-Li) versus Philology (K'ao-cheng): The Jen-hsin tao-hsin Debate", *T'oung Pao*, LXIX, 4-5, 1983, pp. 175-222.

⁷ Betty Peh-T'i Wei, *Ruan Yuan, 1764-1849. The Life and Work of a Major Scholar-Official in Nineteenth-Century China before the Opium War*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006.

⁸ *Qingshi gao* 清史稿, juan 364, Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1977, pp. 11421-11424.

Hangzhou when he was itinerant governor in Zhejiang (1800), and of the Xuehai tang 學海堂 (Academy of the Ocean of Erudition) at Canton in 1820.⁹ These two institutions were the bastions of the specialists of Han studies in Zhejiang and Canton, which were regions that played an important role in the academic sphere in this period. In Zhejiang, he directed the compilation of the *Jingji zuangu* 經籍纂詁 (Exegetical Dictionary of the Classics) in 106 *juan*, highly praised by the celebrated scholar Wang Yinzhi 王引之 (1766-1834), son of Wang Niansun 王念孫 (1744-1832).¹⁰ In Jiangxi, he reedited the Song version of the *Shisanjing zhushu* for which he wrote a critical note (*jiaokan ji* 校勘記) for the editing of each of the Classics.¹¹ In Canton, he edited the *Xuehai tang jingjie* 學海堂經解 (Interpretations of the Classics of the Xuehai Tang), better known under the name *Huang Qing jing jie* 皇清經解 (Interpretations of the Classics of the Great Qing). This compilation in 1400 *juan* comprises 188 exegetical works by 73 authors of the 17th and 18th centuries. The publication of the *Shisanjing zhushu*, *Jingji zuangu* and *Huang Qing jingjie* brought together a synthesis of Han studies centred on the study of the Classics from the Qianlong and Jiaqing eras. As to his own writings, they are essentially contained in the *Yanjing shi ji*, which was compiled in the 3rd year of the Daoguang reign (1823) for his 60th birthday.

Ruan Yuan's intellectual training was intimately linked to the school of Dai Zhen. In his own words, he benefited when he arrived in Beijing around 1786 from the teaching of three of Dai Zhen's disciples: Wang Niansun, *zi* Huaizu 懷祖, Ren Dachun 任大椿 (1738-1789), *zi* Zitian 子田 et Shao Jinhan 邵晉涵 (1743-1796), *zi* Eryun 二雲. He became friends with Qian Daxin 錢大昕 (1728-1804), Jiao Xun et Ling Tingkan 凌廷堪 (1755-1809). Ruan Yuan touched almost all the realms of knowledge and Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 (1792-1841) summarises ten of them : textual criticism, exegesis, bibliographical science, historiography, the study of institutional systems, studies of bronze inscriptions, mathematics, stylistics, philosophy, and astrology.¹² It is important to remember that he is the supervisor of the compilation of the *Chouren zhuan* 疇人傳 (Biographies of Astronomers and Mathematicians).¹³ However, the foundational discipline for him is exegesis (*xungu* 訓詁), since this was the starting point of philosophy. On this point, he remains faithful to Dai Zhen and Qian Daxin, whose work Ruan Yuan edited at his death. He stated:

⁹ On the relations between the Xuehai tang and the texts of the Classics in "modern writing", see Benjamin A. Elman, "The Hsüeh-hai T'ang and the Rise of New Text Scholarship in Canton", *Ch'ing-shih wen-t'i (Late Imperial China)*, 4, 2 (1979), pp. 51-82. A Chinese version (*Xuehai tang yu jinwen jingxue zai Guangzhou de xingqi* 學海堂與今文經學在廣州的興起), translated by Che Xingjian 車行健, is published in *Hunan daxue xuebao (Shehui kexue ban)* 湖南大學學報 (社會科學版), vol. 20, 2006, no. 2, pp. 13-20.

¹⁰ Wang Yinzhi states in the preface of the *Jingji zuangu* : "In a single rhyme are gathered all the characters concerned; each one of them conserves all the etymological explanations ; these allow for the understanding of the works" (展一韻而眾字畢備, 檢一字而諸訓皆存, 尋一訓而原書可識).

¹¹ Certain contemporary researchers attribute this compilation to Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735-1815); see the article by Wang Shaoying 汪紹楹, "Ruanshi chongke Songben *Shisanjing zhushu* kao" 阮氏重刻宋本十三經註疏考 (Investigation on Ruan Yuan's edition of a Song version of the *Shisanjing zhushu*), *Wenshi* 文史, no. 3, 1963, pp. 25-60.

¹² Zhang Jian 張鑑, *Ruan Yuan nianpu* 阮元年譜 (Chronological Table of Ruan Yuan, year by year), Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1995, appendix 3, pp. 273-274.

¹³ Catherine Jami tells us that the *Chouren zhuan* is nowadays believed to have been written mainly by Li Rui 李銳 (1769-1817) who was a client of Ruan Yuan. See also Jean-Claude Martzloff, *A History of Chinese Mathematics*, trans. Stephen S. Wilson, Berlin / Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2006 (1997), pp. 166-173.

In sum, the Dao of the saints is the same as a house. The study of words and their origins is the way to accede to it. If you pass beside this, all your steps will turn away from it. How does one rise to the great hall and enter into study? He that searches for the Way too high up and who has but disdain for phrase by phrase exegesis is like a bird that would project itself into the sky from the rooftop. He will certainly go high but will be unable to see what is between the door and corners of the house. For others, who content themselves with classifying names and things without discussing the Dao of the saints, everything happens as if their whole life flowed between the portal and the entryway, without thinking for an instant to explore the great hall and study.¹⁴

聖人之道譬若宮牆，文字訓詁其門逕也。門逕苟誤，跬步皆岐，安能升堂入室乎？學人求道太高，卑視章句，譬猶天際之翔出於豐屋之上。高則高矣，戶奧之間，未實窺也。或者但求名物，不論聖道，又若終年寢饋於門廡之間，無復知有堂室矣。¹⁵

The study of the Dao here is that of the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming, or Song studies, whereas the studies of terms and their origins, *xungu* or exegesis, is more specific to the Confucians of the Han period, hence the name “Han studies”. Ruan Yuan is certainly a great heir of this latter tradition. However, he keeps a balanced vision of the two:

The teaching of the two Han excels in the study of the Confucian Classics. The reading of the Song and the Ming brings out the benefits of the Way of the Masters. With regard to the Way of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius, each one has obtained a part. It is not suitable to privilege one and mock the other. The successive sovereigns of our dynasty, endowed with a pure Way and a perfect virtue, inherit all that comes from the ancients. They advocate the Way of human nature in Song studies, but they bring it to concrete expression through the meaning of the Classics of the Han Confucians.

兩漢名教，得儒經之功；宋明講學，得師道之益；皆於周孔之道，得其分合，未可偏譏而互誚也。我朝列聖，道德純備，包涵前古，崇宋學之性道，而以漢儒經義實之。

¹⁶

Ruan Yuan's point of view certainly represents that of the Qing court. It is known that the quarrels between Han and Song studies reached a crucial stage with the publication of the *Hanxue shicheng ji* 漢學師承記 (The Transmission of Han Studies from Masters to Disciples) by Jiang Fan 江藩 (1812) and of the *Hanxue shangdui* 漢學商兌 (Discussions on Han Studies) by Fang Dongshu 方東樹 (1826).¹⁷ The first author reproaches Song studies for “not looking for the origin of rites and music by only emphasising human nature and destiny” and of “leaving exegetical works in the box by considering them as dross”.¹⁸ The

¹⁴ Translation in French by Anne Cheng in *Histoire de la pensée chinoise* (History of Chinese thought), Seuil, 1997, p. 573.

¹⁵ Ruan Yuan, “Ni Guoshi Rulin zhuan xu” 擬國史儒林傳序 (Preface to the Project of the History of our Dynasty, “Forest of scholars” chapter), in *Yanjing shi ji* 學經室集, Book 1, *juan* 2, *Congshu jicheng jianbian* 叢書集成簡編, Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1966, p. 32.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ According to Prof. Zhu Weizheng 朱維錚, the dispute between Han and Song studies could go back to the conflict between Dai Zhen and Yao Nai 姚鼐 (1731-1815), a representative of the Tongcheng school and the master of Fang Dongshu. See his article « Hanxue yu fan Hanxue » 漢學與反漢學——江藩的《漢學師承記》、《宋學淵源記》和方東樹的《漢學商兌》 (For or against Han studies: Jiang Fan's *Hanxue shicheng ji* and *Songxue yuanyuan ji* (Record of the Origin and the Development of Song Studies [in the Qing Dynasty]) and Fang Dongshu's *Hanxue shangdui*), *Qiusuo zhen wenming* 求索真文明 (In Search of a Real Civilisation), Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, pp. 13-43.

¹⁸ Jian Fan, *Hanxue shicheng ji* 漢學師承記, *juan* 1, Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1970, p. 2.

second author, on the contrary, judges that the scholars of Han studies “stray in the irrational and in calumnies, reject entirely the teaching of the sages consisting of personal vigilance in conduct, the search for human meaning, self-cultivation, the ordering of the household, the management of the state and the governance of the empire”. For him, the advocates of Han studies “in reality introduce disorder into the Classics under the pretext of studying them, setting up obstacles in the Dao all the while pretending to defend it”. He goes all the way to saying that the ill effects of Han studies are “a hundred times more important than that of Chan and intuitionism (*xinxue* 心學) with regard to the teaching of the world and academic work”.¹⁹ Jiang Fan was a compatriot of Ruan Yuan who prefaced his work. As well, during his writing, Jiang was Ruan Yuan’s counsellor in Canton. At the same time, Fang Dongshu was also a client of Ruan to whom he dedicated his work. Zhu Weizheng 朱維諍 indicates that it is Ruan Yuan’s name which appears most frequently in this work.²⁰ This confirms his primary importance in the camp of Han studies. However, Ruan goes beyond his own intellectual propensity and does not set aside all the partisans of Song studies. Fang Dongshu was employed by him as a teacher at the Xuehai tang 學海棠 which he created. His leadership role surpassed academic cleavages. For Ruan Yuan, knowledge of ancient commentaries serves as a way to access the study of the Dao, whose goal is the understanding of principle, human nature, and the Dao. One can say that Ruan Yuan, the last great representative of Han studies in the Qianlong and Jiaqing periods, prepared their harmonisation with Song studies that was later taken up by such people as Liu Shiwei 劉師培 (1884-1919), Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811-1872), and Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837-1909).²¹

Ruan Yuan never ceases to say that his explanation of the Classics is aimed at “bringing to light the ancient interpretations and searching out for truth in reality” (推明古訓，實事求是).²² For him, “not only can the deep ideas of the saints and sages not be understood without exegesis, but also their ideas that are apparently simple to access” (聖賢之言，不但深遠者非詁不明，即淺近者亦非詁不明也).²³ He says elsewhere that their Dao is preserved in the Classics which cannot be clarified without exegesis (聖賢之道存于經，經非詁不明).²⁴ The more distant the period, the closer to the intentions of the sages are the sayings of the commentators. This is why the model needs to be that of the Han interpreters because they lived in a period that was relatively not too distant from the pre-imperial era, and one where the influence of Daoism and Buddhism was still restricted. Among the Han thinkers, it is Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200) and Xu Shen 許慎 (58-147) who are most particularly highlighted by him. On the request of Sun Xingyan, at that time a teacher at the Jinggu academy, Ruan Yuan decided to venerate these two representatives of the Classics in the Han “ancient writing” (*guwen* 古文) at the sacrificial altar of the Jinggu jingshe.

¹⁹ Fang Dongshu, “Preface” to the *Hanxue shangdui* 漢學商兌, Taipei: Guangwen chubanshe, 1963, p. 2.

²⁰ Zhu Weizheng, “Hanxue yu fan Hanxue”, p. 29; Sun Huajing 孫華璟, “Ruan Yuan dui Han Song xueshu zhi pingyi” 阮元對漢宋學術之平議 (Ruan Yuan’s Discussion on the Relation of Han and Sung Studies), *Zhongguo xueshu niankan* 中國學朮年刊, vol. 30, 2008, pp. 79-104.

²¹ On this aspect, see Guo Mingdao 郭明道, « Ruan Yuan yu Qingdai xuefen » 阮元與清代學風 (Ruan Yuan and the academic trends of the Qing), *Jianghai xuekan* 江海學刊, 2006, no. 6, p. 174-180. Guo Mingdao is also the author of *Ruan Yuan pingzhuan* 阮元評傳, Peking: Shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005.

²² Ruan Yuan, *Yanjing shi ji*, “Auto-preface”, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

²³ Ruan Yuan, “Lunyu yiguan shuo” 論語一貫說 (Explanation of the Expression *yiguan* in the *Analects*), *Yanjing shi ji*, Book 1, *juan* 2, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

²⁴ Ruan Yuan, “Xihu Gujing jingshe ji” 西湖詁經精舍記 (Note on the Gujing Academy on the Western Lake), *Yanjing shi ji*, book 2, *juan* 7, *op. cit.*, p. 505.

The Han studies put forward by Ruan Yuan did not only include *guwen*, but also those of the Gongyang 公羊 school of *jinwen* 今文 (modern writing) represented by Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BCE) and He Xiu 何休 (129-182).²⁵ Moreover, Ruan Yuan accords a great importance to Mao Qiling 毛奇齡 (1623-1716), an author neglected by Dai Zhen and other Han studies specialists in favour of Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613-1682). He states concerning this great scholar in his postscript to the *Work of Mao Qiling* that “he took up the responsibility of the study of the Classics by shouting high and strong. Therefore, practical studies were raised in a short lapse of time” (以經學為自任，大聲疾呼，一時之實學頓起).²⁶ His sympathy cut short the doubts that certain scholars had about Mao Qiling, the author of *Sishu gaicuo* 四書改錯 (Corrections of the Errors of the [Commentaries of the] Four Books) that takes direct aim at the *Sishu jizhu* 四書集注 (General Survey of the Commentaries of the Four Books) by Zhu Xi (1130-1200). It is important to note that Tansen was also aware of Mao Qiling’s work.

Among the Confucian Classics, Ruan Yuan insists on the role of the *Odes* (*Shi* 詩) and the *Documents* (*Shu* 書), considering them as constituting the basis of the study of Confucius and Mencius. However, he also pays particular attention to the *Xiaojing* 孝經, the *Classic of Filial Piety*. In an esoteric commentary of this Classic, there is a phrase that claims to take up again what Confucius said: “My ambition lies in the *Chunqiu* (The Spring and Autumn Annals) and my conduct in the *Xiaojing* (Classic of Filial Piety).” (吾志在《春秋》，行在《孝經》). Ruan Yuan considers that this phrase could not in any way have been invented by the apocryphal authors of the Han, but was really from Confucius himself. He pursues his argument in this way:

The two-character title *Xiaojing* was given by Confucius himself. It is because of this that he said: “My conduct can be read in the *Classic of Filial Piety*.” It is said in the *Shiji* (The Histories): “Confucius found that Zengzi was able to follow the Way of filial piety. This is why he transmitted it to him by composing the *Xiaojing*.” It is equally stated in the “Bibliographies” chapter of the *Book of the Han*: “Filial piety constitutes the framework of Heaven, the meaning of Earth and the conduct of the people. To express its basis, there was then the *Classic of Filial Piety*.” From these ancient works we know that the term *jing* begins to exist from this Classic, from where come the names of the Five Classics, Six Classics, Nine Classics, and Thirteen Classics. If Buddhism and Daoism have attributed titles of works with the character *jing*, it is that they also inherited it from this.

《孝經》二字標題，乃孔子所自名。故孔子曰：“吾行在《孝經》”。《史記》：“孔子以曾子為能通孝道，故授之以業，作《孝經》。”《漢書·藝文志》曰：“夫孝，天之經，地之義，民之行也。舉大者言，故曰《孝經》。”據此諸古籍，知“經”之一字，始于此書。自此之後，五經、六經、九經、十三經之名，皆出于此。釋、道之名其書曰“經”，亦始襲取于此。²⁷

²⁵ Chen Juyuan 陳居淵, “Lun Ruan Yuan de jingxue sixiang” 論阮元的經學思想 (Ruan Yuan’s Thoughts on the Study of the Classics), *Zhongguo zhexueshi* 中國哲學思想史, 2004, no. 1, pp. 90-96. On the quarrels between the *jinwen* and the *guwen* under the Han, see Anne Cheng, *Étude sur le confucianisme Han : l’élaboration d’une tradition exégétique sur les Classiques* (Study on Han Confucianism: the Elaboration of an Exegetical Tradition on the Classics), Paris: Collège de France, IHEC, 1985.

²⁶ Ruan Yuan, “Mao Xihe Jiantao quanji houxu” 毛西河檢討全集後序 (Postscript to the *Work of Mao Qiling*), *Yanjing shi ji*, Book 2, *juan* 7, *op. cit.*, p. 501.

²⁷ “Xiaojing jie” 孝經解, in *Yanjing shi ji*, Book 1, *juan* 2, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

It is true that among the classical texts from the pre-imperial period, only the *Xiaojing* includes in the title itself the character *jing* which was added to the others from Han times. The relation of the Classics is not a resolved question even today. Most researchers consider the *Xiaojing* to have come after Confucius from the fact that the terms *Zi yue* 子曰 (Confucius said) appear frequently. However this does not pose a problem for Ruan Yuan since the *Lunyu* (The Analects) and the *Mencius* only take up or transmit the ideas of the *Xiaojing*. It is said in the *Lunyu*: “A gentleman occupies himself with the essential. When the essential is established, the Way emerges. Filial piety and brotherly love are the foundation of the sense of humanity” (Chapter 2). In the *Analec*s, these remarks are attributed to Youzi, Confucius’ disciple. However, Ruan Yuan considers them to be originally those of the Master’s. For Ruan, filial piety is the primordial aspect of *ren* (sense of humanity) which he interprets very differently from that of the Song Neo-Confucians.

Almost all the contemporary commentators of Ruan Yuan’s philosophy have remarked on his “*Lunyu lun ren lun*” 論語論仁論 (On the Sense of Humanity as Discussed in the *Analec*s) included in the *Yanjing shi ji*. In this text, Ruan Yuan refers to the *Da Dai Liji* 大戴禮記 (Records of Rites by Dai Senior) and the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (Doctrine of the Mean). The first work states that man cannot succeed alone without others just as a horse cannot draw a wagon without forming a group of four or as a drop of water does not flow. As for him, Zheng Xuan comments on the identification of *ren* with man in the *Zhongyong* through the expression « *xiang ren’ou* » 相人偶 which should mean mutual help or relation between people. Ruan Yuan retains this exegesis, which is in accord with that of the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Etymological Dictionary) of Xu Shen, and which states that « *ren’ou* 人偶 in its ancient sense, was a term that designated the friendship between you and me » (古所謂“人偶”, 猶言爾我親愛之辭).²⁸ In this text, Ruan Yuan reproaches Zigong, Confucius’ disciple, for elevating *ren* too much, situating it on the same level as holiness (*sheng* 聖). This criticism is also applicable to the Song Neo-Confucians, who associate it to Heavenly Principle (*tianli* 天理). In Ruan Yuan’s eyes, practising *ren* is helping them, respecting them... In this way, instead of defining *ren* as « the virtue of the mind, the principle of love » (心之德, 愛之理) after the fashion of Zhu Xi, Ruan Yuan endows it with a more practical dimension, which is for him inherent in the Way of wisdom. He states:

Ren only appears through the application of experience, on the condition that this is performed in the presence of a third person. By shutting himself up at home to fast or crouch down in calm with closed eyes, a man, even if he is internally endowed with virtue and reason, cannot obtain that which the saints call “the sense of humanity”.

凡仁，必於身所行者驗之而始見，亦必有二人而仁乃見。若一人閉戶齋居，瞑目靜坐，雖有德理在心，終不得指為聖門所謂之仁矣。²⁹

This practical aspect also characterises his explanation of other philosophical terms such as *xing* 性 (human nature) and *xin* 心 (mind-heart); he always verifies their etymology and as much as possible, strips them of their metaphysical interpretation. It is perhaps this point as well that differentiates him from Dai Zhen, who more consciously constructed a philosophical system from a critique of Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism³⁰. Ruan says: “the semantic

²⁸ Ruan Yuan, “*Lunyu lun ren lun*” 論語論仁論, *Yanjing shi ji*, Book 1, *juan* 8, p. 159.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 157.

³⁰ Huang Aiping 黃愛平, “Qian Jia Hanxue zhixue zongzhi jiqi xueshu shijian tanxi: yi Dai Zhen Ruan Yuan wei zhongxin” 乾嘉漢學治學宗旨及其學術實踐探析——以戴震、阮元為中心 (The Academic Principle

category of the term *xing* is *xin*, that is to say blood, vital energy, the heart and intelligence” (“性”字從心，即血氣心知也). He criticises what Li Ao 李翱 (circa 772-836) calls “the return to human nature” (*fu xing* 復性) but puts forward the notion “measure of human nature” (*jie xing* 節性).³¹ This is because Li Ao distinguishes human nature (*xing*) and the emotions (*qing* 情) (joy, anger, sadness, fear, love, aversion, and desire). For Ruan Yuan, human nature is an integral part of human emotions. It is sufficient to take proper measures so that desires do not overflow. This is done through the study of the rites, the importance of which was explicitly noted by his friend Ling Tingkan 凌廷堪.³²

Possessing an encyclopaedic spirit, Ruan Yuan played the role of intellectual leader of his time. He gathered around him scholars from all horizons (Han and Song studies, *guwen* and *jinwen* study of the Classics) and directed the most important compilations of classical texts under the Qing. His own hermeneutics were founded essentially on previous linguistic work, from which emerges the importance in his work of the search for the etymological meaning of philosophical terms. He did not set out to invent a new philosophy but rather to give a more authentic perspective by respecting the interpretation of the Classics made by the Han commentators and introducing a more practical and less metaphysical dimension. The two academies (Gujing jingshe and Xuehai tang) that he created in Zhejiang and Canton became models of the training of intellectuals who were often endowed with an acute sense of China’s new reality. From the Xuehai tang emerged scholars such as Chen Feng 陳澧 (1810-1882), who further developed the harmonisation of Han and Song studies put forward by Ruan Yuan, and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929), who was also much influenced in his youth by Ruan Yuan. Ruan lived all the way to the Opium War and sensed the tension between Chinese and Western knowledge, of which he was completely aware. However, the theorisation of this complex relationship would be the object of his successors such as Zhang Zhitong, Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927), Liang Qichao and Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854-1921).

and Practices of the Han-Learning School during the Qianlong and Jiaqing Periods : Dai Zhen and Ruan Yuan), *Qingshi yanjiu* 清史研究, no. 3, 2002, pp. 91-98.

³¹ Ruan Yuan, “Xingming gu xun” 性命古訓, *Yanjing shi ji*, Book 1, *juan* 10, pp. 191-214.

³² On Ling Tingkan, see Chang So-an’s 張壽安 work: *Yi li dai li: Ling Tingkan yu Qing zhongye ruxue sixiang zhi zhuanbian* 以禮代理：凌廷堪與清中葉儒學思想之轉變 (Replacement of Principle by Rites: Ling Tingkan and the Transformation of Scholarly Thought in the mid-Qing), Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 1994 ; *Shiba shiji li xue kaozheng de sixiang huoli: lijiao lunzheng yu lizhi chong xing* 十八世紀禮學考證的思想活力：禮教論爭與禮秩重省 (The Liveliness of Spirit in the Philological Tradition of the Study of the Rites in the XVIIIth Century : The Quarrels concerning the Teaching of the Rites and the New Exam of the Order of Rites), Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 2001.